THE INVENTION OF POLITICS IN COLONIAL MALAYA

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INTRODUCTION

Colonialism, Nationalism and Contest

The revolutions erupting through Eastern Europe late in 1989 raised questions as well as hopes, and one of these questions concerns the concept of 'politics'. Several commentators remarked that the people of post-communist states would need to learn not just about the art of democracy but also about the practice of politics.[1] 'Politics', it would seem, was viewed by such commentators as a preliminary step toward mastering that higher art. For many of us who read judgements of this type, however, the very notion of an absence of politics is puzzling.

We live in an age of politics. Just as the mediaeval European considered "every activity, every day" to be "saturated with religion" (thus making 'unbelief' inconceivable),[2] so we in the late twentieth century possess a fundamentally political outlook. We tend to attribute a political significance, often a political motivation, to virtually every action no matter in what type of society or in what period of history that action may have occurred. We take for granted, as the anthropologist Louis Dumont has complained, that all communities "have politics",[3] in the sense that they consist of individuals maximizing their advantages and manipulating their situations. We assume that each polity represents the sum total of the 'rational' political manoeuvrings of its individual citizens.

Possessing such assumptions it is easy to neglect that transition in European history when people began to see themselves as ***homo politicus***.[4] Even in the study of 'political development', we tend to accept the concept 'political' as a given, rarely seeking to define or dissect it. Analysts of post-colonial societies, for instance, investigate the emergence of the state, of nationalism, and even of political systems but seldom the actual development of politics.[5] This neglect has implications not just for the depth of our understanding of the dynamics and

challenges of change within specific societies, whether they be post-colonial or post-communist. To investigate the 'inventing' of politics in specific situations, it might be argued, may also sharpen our understanding of politics generally as a practice and a discourse.

This book is concerned with the 'inventing' of politics in Malaysia. The Malays (who today make up a little over a half of the population of that country) have themselves alluded to this development and yet their comments have provoked little curiosity among scholars. Certain Malay writers have even remarked that until the late colonial period "no politics" existed among the Malays.[6] This comment seems to refer to the absence of more than just political institutions and political parties. There was in the Malay language no specific word for 'politics'. In the twentieth century, Malays have experimented with an Arabic term (*siasat*) as well as *politik*[7] and one author of the 1920s went so far as to refer to politics as a new *adat* or 'custom'.[8]

In the following chapters I shall develop the argument that the new *adat*, or perhaps, discourse of politics can be identified in the changing terms of ideological debate taking place in Malay society. These changes began to occur in the British colonial era (which commenced at the end of the eighteenth century) and they may be understood, in part, as a product of the administrative and ideological forces of imperialism. Malays themselves, however, were architects of the new politics and it is in this sense that we might speak of a creative or inventive process. What precisely was entailed in the process is a subject which I examine in some detail. In this matter, furthermore, the Malay experience possesses a wider, intercultural significance.

The project which led to the writing of this book, and determines to a large extent its scope and presentation, was not initially concerned with investigating politics as a discourse. My earlier intention, inspired by a desire to understand divisions in present-day Malay society as well as by a theoretical interest, was to examine the character of ideological change and conflict in Malay society during the years of British imperial power. (By 'ideology' I meant – and mean – no more than "that part of culture which is actually concerned with the establishment and defence of patterns of belief and value";[9] to focus on ideology rather than culture stresses the element of creativity and process in culture.) I was suspicious of analyses which stressed the dominating presence of colonialism to such an extent as to allow little agency to the colonial subject.

In the ideological and certain other spheres, I anticipated, many forms of colonialism, even apparently brutal forms, allowed their victims a vital degree of elbow room.[10] In the case of colonial Malay society (which suffered very little violent repression), we know that there occurred what has been termed a "passive revolution" or "war of

position" against the *ancien régime.*[11] A battle for ideological hegemony was fought between, on the one hand, the defenders of the old monarchical system which had dominated Malay society for some centuries before the arrival of the British, and, on the other, the exponents of new and subversive doctrines derived both from a resurgent Islam and from Enlightenment Europe. Although those engaged in this struggle responded in various ways to the threats and stimulation of colonialism, it is clear that the agenda and pace of the war of words were not governed merely by colonialist imperatives. In order to uncover that agenda and to determine the terms of the debate, I decided to examine a selection of written statements which seemed to possess a special strategic significance in Malay ideological writing. Although each of these statements is justificatory in style, the assumption can be made that ideologues came in a wide range of forms and professions. A school textbook or a coronation memento, for instance, might be treated as 'ideology'.

An additional and perhaps obvious point ought to be made about my approach to these selected texts. In seeking to understand the operation of Malay ideology-making, I inevitably brought to bear my own late twentieth-century perspective. Previous investigators into Malay society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have tended to stress elements of unity, particularly those contributing to the development of nationalistic sentiment.[12] Because they wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when nation-building in Malaya and many other parts of the colonial and post-colonial world influenced the writing of history,[13] such a preoccupation was understandable. When I commenced research, however, it seemed less important to understand the unities than the divisions in Malay society. In the 1970s and 1980s sharp rifts in that society became increasingly evident. There were signs not merely of developing class divisions but also of ideological confrontation over matters of religion, monarchy and nationalism. In recent years books have been written with such titles as *Dissension in the Malay Community*[14] and the dominant Malay, nationalist party (The United Malays National Organization, UMNO), which has governed the country since independence, has become radically divided. A discussion of the emergence of ideological division in colonial Malaya, therefore, has an immediate significance for students of current Malay history and politics. It possesses too a vital historiographical interest. In the case of a country noted for its lack of military confrontations, of wars of resistance or of rebellion, an ideological 'war of position' involving not only the subversion of a monarchical system but also the presence of contending perceptions of human association and human purpose, offers a historical theme of universal significance.

The structure and method of this book reflects in a number of ways these initial aspirations. To probe as closely as possible the perceptions and experience of the Malay colonial subject I take a long view. The historical records of the Malays, unlike those of many Pacific and African societies, allow such a view. In Malaysia and numerous other regions of Southeast Asia, indigenous writings (in the form of inscriptions and chronicles) survive from pre-colonial times and the existence of such documents permits us to attempt to construct indigenous perspectives from which to interpret the significance of the encounter with colonialism. In Southeast Asian studies, this concern with an indigenous point of view has been associated with an 'autonomous' historiography[15] which is sceptical of 'development' models. That is, it is suspicious of perceptions of the past which are structured around the fundamentals of modernity – the state, nationalism, capitalism, the human individual and so forth.

Although the following pages attempt to delineate indigenous categories and to avoid a 'development' approach, they also depart from the stress on cultural continuities which characterizes much 'autonomous' history. My strategy might be described as 'prospective'. In seeking to identify transition as well as continuity, I look forward rather than backward into the colonial period. From a prospective rather than a retrospective angle of vision, it is easier to perceive the uncertainties, the ruptures and the tensions in any social situation. Such an approach makes one wary of what have been termed master narratives,[16] whether 'developmental' or 'autonomous', which tend to subsume and conceal many of the disjunctions and contestations which characterize human experience. In the field of ideology it might be argued that a 'prospective' analysis is likely to be sensitive to the way in which indigenous perspectives are brought into dialogue with novel and sometimes threatening ideologies. Seeking to survey the landscape ahead rather than a journey accomplished, this strategy can bring into view a wide range of alternative outcomes. It may highlight, too, the distance between these alternatives. In a 'retrospective' approach, depending on the moment of recapitulation, all roads converge before the analytic eye.

The most influential, pioneering, study of Malay society in the colonial period is in one important sense a retrospective analysis. Written some thirty years ago, soon after Malaya had attained independence in 1957, W.R. Roff's *Origins of Malay Nationalism* is one of those works concerned to identify unifying elements and processes in colonial Malay society. Roff combed the surprisingly large body of indigenous Malay books, pamphlets and periodicals published between the late nineteenth century and the Japanese Occupation, in order to "trace the slow growth of communal, ethnic, and national feeling

among the peninsular Malays". In his analysis he distinguished a number of élite groups which offered "an implicit challenge to the traditional status quo ... in the interests of a specifically Malay nationalism"[17]. It is because Roff gave such prominence to nationalistic unity that it is likely to be profitable today to re-read the documentation of colonial Malay society. We need to tease out wherever possible elements not of cohesion and agreement but of division and debate. 'Nationalism' might best be perceived not as an analytical given but as a novel ideology which was only in the process of being defined. The present book is a record of such a prospective re-reading.

My scope, in a sense, is both modest and controversial. Although acknowledging the processes of power and economics which shaped colonial and post-colonial Malay society, this book focuses mainly on perceptions, that is, on the writings of Malays themselves. I also investigate in detail only a limited sample of these writings.

Textual studies have sometimes been derided in recent years as the flawed instrument of a reprehensible orientalism. But when Edward Said, for instance, condemns those who prefer the "schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human",[18] the reply involves not merely the observation that the subjects of many studies are no longer available for interview. It can also be argued that the reading of texts sometimes offers far more than a substitute for personal encounter. One may move around texts, scrutinizing them at leisure, reading them against one another and in terms of the evidence of their social context. Although unlikely to value texts above real people, textualists are, at the same time, conscious of the closure sometimes entailed in the notion of 'person'. We are wary, for instance, of the essential humanism which pervades Said's own writing. The 'text' as a conceptual entity requires no fixed theory of authorship or subjectivity. Interrogating texts rather than persons can thus give greater scope, greater free play, to the expression of autonomous perspectives.

Partly to facilitate this patient circumambulation the intention here is to interrogate, to use a fashionable expression, selected texts. They are not the 'hidden transcripts', the rare record of backstage communication of which James Scott has written,[19] but rather public documents. Yet it is my conviction that texts of this type can reveal a great deal of the substance and character of ideological struggle. Such texts, of course, require close reading. It is necessary to pay attention not only to the arguments presented but also to the vocabulary, the rhetoric, the idioms and the conventions employed. We need to be especially alert to the presence of innovation in language and style, a concern which has received remarkably little attention in the study of Asian societies.[20] Bringing public documents into dialogue with one another is one way

of assisting this type of analysis. In interrogating my chosen ideological texts 'intertextually', I aim, in particular, to give a sense of the movement, reconciliation, temporization, capitulation and other ideological commotion which have distinguished intellectual life in British Malaya and many other colonial situations.

The book begins with a consideration of certain notions concerning allegiance and identity held in the peninsular sultanates (the *kerajaan*) on the eve of colonial rule. My strategy is to read a nineteenth-century, Western-influenced, Malay critique of the 'traditional' polity in dialogue with certain 'traditional' documents. In the following chapters I investigate further challenges driven by Islamic as well as European ideology. The authors of these challenges were in intellectual correspondence and competition with one another. Most importantly, I also attempt to expose the different ways in which the spokesmen of the Malay royal courts responded to the provocations of both these types of critic and rival. The final text discussed in this book, a descriptive account of Malay society in the last years before the Japanese Occupation, enunciates the provocative doctrines of what today might be termed a socialistic nationalism. In my account of colonial Malaya, however, nationalism never achieves hegemony as a defined and widely acknowledged doctrine. Even in the last years of the British presence, the character and value of nationalism continued to be a matter of debate.

Each chapter of this book, therefore, revolves around one or several Malay texts. The discussion of these texts is concerned, first, with understanding exactly what is being said by the different Malay ideologues and how they disagree with one another. Attention is paid especially to their views about community and identity, about the foundations of social organization and the way in which the social individual is perceived. In the cacophony of competing claims and voices, I focus on three ideological orientations. These orientations promote allegiance, respectively, to three distinct forms of community in Malay society – the sultanate or *kerajaan*, the Islamic congregation or *umat* and the Malay race or *bangsa*. In the third orientation we encounter (in our prospective analysis) the postulating of doctrines often associated with nationalism. In some situations, I argue, the differences between these orientations are not merely concerned with claims or programs. They are differences of what has been termed a 'thematic' type,[21] that is to say, they entail disputes over the justificatory aspects of ideology, the underlying concepts of knowledge and reality upon which programmatic concerns are founded.

Having defined a range of Malay ideological positions, noting in particular their thematic reach, we proceed to examine ways in which the ideologues appear to respond to, and argue with, one another.[22] In

particular, I seek to identify elements of experimentation in ideology-making, moments, perhaps, when Malay writers sought to comprehend or reformulate alien doctrines. The resourcefulness and the creativity of these writers is given particular attention. At specific points in their dialogues and arguments it is also possible to detect a certain dialectical progress. Examined over an extended period, ideas sometimes appear to be bonded together in linked series or concatenations. Here we find evidence of independent momentum, of 'autonomy', yet it is the autonomy of processes rather than cultural continuities. In this particular type of 'long view', the power of 'tradition' is demonstrated, but not by its ability to retain ideological ascendancy or hegemony. What I stress is its capacity to contribute to processes of change, for instance, to influence in either a positive or a negative way the actual agenda of ideological debate.[23]

It is in the revising of both this agenda and the terms of the Malay debate that we encounter the 'invention' of politics. The reader will immediately observe that the three ideological orientations which I distinguish are in no sense fixed positions. They are each transformed in dialogue with one another and, what is more, the specific character of their interaction also alters during the colonial period. The struggle for ascendancy in the 1930s, it is evident, is fundamentally different from the contest of the early nineteenth century. Although the doctrines debated by the new community of journalists, pamphleteers and incipient politicians active on the eve of the Japanese Occupation are genealogically linked to those in dispute in the early British years, by the later period a fresh intellectual climate had emerged. This climate – what certain Malays spoke of as a new 'awareness' or new 'politics' – entailed the construction of a novel architecture of debate in Malay society. It involved changes not only in the topics addressed but also in the language, rhetoric and rules by which that debate was pursued. Although the struggle for ideological hegemony in Malay society was in no sense resolved by the 1940s (or even by the last decades of this century), it might be argued that the contest itself fostered the construction of a new discourse.

The concerns of this book go beyond describing this discursive transition. What, we shall ask, were its origins? In certain instances the new discourse seems to have been deliberately engineered; in other situations the changes seem unintentional. The latter, it will be seen, may be best understood as failed attempts to accomplish ideological repair (what de Certau refers to as *bricolage*[24]), carried out perhaps in ignorance of long-term structural consequences. Examining the emergence of this new awareness inevitably clarifies our understanding of the dynamics of political tension in post-independence Malay society. It might also be argued that by attending to the appearance of 'politics'

in Malaya, and by investigating the way in which this development mediated ideological confrontation, we raise far-reaching conceptual questions about 'politics' and the 'invention' of politics in both post-colonial and post-communist states.

Notes

1 See, for instance, *New York Times*, 3 February 1990; and *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 December 1989.
2 L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 343.
3 'Preface by Louis Dumont to the French edition of *The Nuer*', in J.H.M. Beattie and R.G. Lienhardt (eds), *Studies in Social Anthropology: Essays in Memory of E.E. Evans-Pritchard by his former Oxford Colleagues* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 337–9. I am grateful to Professor James Boon for drawing my attention to this essay.
4 For this transition see, in particular, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
5 A recent example is Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987). For an intriguing comment on the origins of printing and propaganda, mass education and modern organization, see p. 162.
6 '... *tidak ada politik*'; Ibrahim Mahmood, *Sejarah Perjuangan Bangsa Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1981), 17. See also, W.R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967), 218 n. 16; 230 n. 51. See also chapter 9 below.
7 Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 217; Mohd. Taib Osman, *The Language of the Editorials in Malay Vernacular Newspapers up to 1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1966), 3, 13.
8 Lufti Effendi, 'Al-Marhum Mustafa Kamil' (orig. pub. 1926), in Zabedah Awang Ngah, *Renongan: Antoloji Esei Melayu dalam tahun 1924–1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1964), 201.
9 James Fallows, quoted in C. Geertz, 'Ideology as a Cultural System', in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 71–2. For a critical survey of the scholarly debate around the issue of ideology, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology. An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991).
10 'If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive'; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 16. For analyses which in some respects exaggerate the dominating character of the colonial presence in Malaya, see Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State, and Uneven Development in Malaya* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), see, for example, 284; C. Hirschman, 'Development and Inequality in Malaysia: From Puthecheary to Mehmet', *Pacific Affairs*, 62, 1 (1989), 74; Yeo Kim Wah, *The Politics of Decentralization: Colonial Controversy in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25.
11 On 'war of position' and 'passive revolution' see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Q. Hoare and G .N. Smith, eds) (New York: International, 1980), 46, 57–60, 120; David Forgacs (ed.), *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: Schocken, 1988), 224–30, 247–8. In his extensive discussions of Gramsci, James C. Scott draws attention to forms of tension and resistance within Malay society which do not entail a confrontation between competing ideologies: *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), chapter 8.
12 See, in particular, Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, and Radin Soernarno, 'Malay Nationalism 1896–1941', *JSEAH*, 1, 1960, 1–29. It is true that Firdaus Haji Abdullah, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Development* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1985) and Khoo Kay Kim, *Malay Society: Transformation and Democratisation* (Petaling Jaya:

Pelanduk, 1991) have put a greater stress on elements of disunity. Nevertheless, Firdaus Haji Abdullah describes the main division as between two types of nationalist – the "conservative nationalists" and the "radical nationalists" (3) – and takes satisfaction from the fact that many ideas formulated by the radicals were eventually adopted by the conservatives (163). Khoo Kay Kim suggests that in considering political developments in Malay society during the colonial period it is more useful to speak of a Malay "struggle" rather than of "Malay nationalism" (177–9), but he tends to assume the "struggle" was unitary in character. He speaks of "the development of this *perjuangan* [struggle]" (179).

13 See, for instance, the comments of S.J. Tambiah, in *Sri Lanka: ethnic diversity, fratricide and the dismantling of democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

14 Abdul Razak Ayub, *Perpecahan Bangsa Melayu* (Shah Alam: Dewan Pustaka Fajar, 1985). *Perpecahan* seems stronger than 'dissension', it suggests 'turmoil' or 'break-up'.

15 See, in particular, J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague: Van Hoeve, 1955); O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982); J.D. Legge, 'The Writing of Southeast Asian History', in N. Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27.

16 Joan W. Scott, 'History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story', *American Historical Review,* 94, 3 (1989), 680–92; R. Ileto, 'Outlines of a Non-Linear Emplotment of Philippine History' in Lim Teck Ghee (ed.) *Reflections on Development in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988), 130–59. For discussion of 'prospective' analysis, see Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formulation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 14–15.

17 Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism,* 248.

18 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 93. Note further, Said's 'Islam, the Philological Vocation and French Culture: Renan and Massignon' in Malcolm H. Kerr (ed.), *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems* (Malibu: Undena, 1980), 63.

19 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

20 Important exceptions are H.M.J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: the Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988) and Jane Drakard: *A Malay Frontier: Unity and Duality in a Sumatran Kingdom* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1990). See also Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989). Sensitivity to innovation in language is not a monopoly of literary criticism; see, for instance, J.G.A. Pocock *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); James Tully (ed.) *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

21 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (New York: Zed Books, 1986), ch. 2. In analysing these different orientations in Malay society I (like so many other scholars) have gained much from Clifford Geertz's analysis of the religious sub-traditions of Java; see especially *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1969) and *The Religion of Java* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

22 For a discussion of ideology as process, see Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

23 For a discussion of such processes, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 4–5.

24 *Bricolage*: 'artisan-like inventiveness'. Michel de Certau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii–xviii; see also the helpful discussion in James A. Boon, *Affinities and Extremes. Crisscrossing the Bittersweet Ethnology of East Indies History, Hindu-Balinese Culture, and Indo-European Allure* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 200 n. 3.